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ABSTRACT

This brochure offers a plan to help college students study for tests. It explains how to prepare for a test and reviews techniques for taking multiple choice, essay, and other types of examinations. Organization, planning, and time management are essential for becoming a successful student. Regular reviews are the key to reducing test anxiety and taking tests successfully. Frequent review is very important. Creating review tools such as flashcards, chapter outlines, and summaries will help the student organize and remember material. Another useful tool is a study checklist. For some subjects, study groups are an effective tool. On exam day the student should arrive early and get organized. Paying attention to the directions, scanning the entire test, and estimating the time needed for each question are useful preliminaries. Specific tips are given for multiple choice, true-false, open-book, short answer, and essay tests. The most important thing to remember about studying for tests is that by studying, the student ensures better learning of the material covered. The ERIC Clearinghouse on Assessment and Evaluation and seven print sources are listed for further information about taking tests. (SLD)

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How To Study for and Take College Tests

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Tests are one method of measuring what you have learned in a course. Doing well on tests and earning good grades begins with good study habits. If your goal is to become a successful student, take the time to develop good study habits.

This brochure offers a plan to help you study for tests. It explains how to prepare for and take tests. Techniques for taking multiple choice, essay, and other types of exams are reviewed. Although these techniques may help you improve your test scores, other factors such as class participation, independent projects, and term papers also contribute to grades.

What Can I Do Before the Test?

Organization, planning, and time management are essential to becoming a successful student; so start studying as soon as classes begin. Read assignments, listen during lectures, and take good classroom notes. Then, reread assignments, highlighting important information to study. Regular reviews help you avoid cramming and reduce test anxiety. The biggest benefit is that it gives you time to absorb information.

Read difficult assignments twice. Sometimes a second reading will clarify concepts. If you are having difficulty with a subject, get help immediately. Meet with your instructor after class, use an alternate text to supplement required reading, or hire a tutor (ask faculty members and other students for referrals).

Review, Review, Review

Plan ahead, scheduling review periods well in advance. Set aside 1 hour per subject on a Saturday or Sunday to review several subjects. Keep your reviews short and do them often.

- **Daily Reviews.** Conduct short reviews of lecture notes before and after class. Begin reviewing after your first day of class.
- **Weekly Reviews.** Dedicate about 1 hour per subject to reviewing assigned reading and lecture notes.
- **Major Reviews.** Start the week before an exam and study the most difficult subjects when you are the most alert. Study for 2 to 5 hours with sufficient breaks. When possible, review previous tests offered by the professor to learn what to do differently next time.

Create review tools, such as flashcards, chapter outlines, and summaries. This helps you organize and remember information as well as condense material to a manageable size. Use 3 x 5-inch index cards to review important information. Write ideas, formulas, concepts, and facts on cards to carry with you. Study on the bus, in the library, or whenever you have a few extra minutes.

Another useful tool is a study checklist. Make a list of everything you will need to know for the exam. The list should include a brief description of reading assignments, types of problems to solve, skills to master, major ideas, theories, definitions, and equations. When you begin your final study sessions, cross off items as you review them.

Should I Organize a Study Group?

For some subjects, study groups are an effective tool. Study groups allow students to combine resources; members share an academic goal and provide support and encouragement. Such groups meet regularly to study and learn a specific subject.

To form a study group, you should look for dedicated students—those who ask and answer questions in class and who take notes. Suggest to two or three classmates that you meet to talk about group goals, meeting times, and other logistics. Effective study

groups are limited to five or six people. Test the group first by planning a one-time-only session. If that works, plan another. After several successful sessions, schedule regular meetings.

Set an agenda for each meeting to avoid wasting time. List the material that will be reviewed so members can come prepared. Also, follow a format. For example, begin by comparing notes to make sure you all heard the same thing and recorded important information. Spend 15 to 20 minutes conducting open-ended discussions on specific topics. Then, test each other by asking questions or take turns explaining concepts. Set aside 5 to 10 minutes to brainstorm possible test questions.

What Should I Do on Exam Day?

On exam day arrive early and get organized. Pay attention to verbal directions as tests are distributed. Read directions slowly. Scan the entire test, noticing how many points each part is worth, and estimate the time needed for individual questions. Before you start answering questions, write down memory aids, formulas, equations, facts, and other useful information in the margins.

Check the time and pace yourself. If you get stuck on a question try to remember a related fact. Start from the general and go to the specific. Look for answers in other test questions. Often a term, name, date, or other fact you have forgotten will appear somewhere else in the test. Move on to the next question if memory aids do not help. You can always go back to the question if you have time.

Test-Taking Tips for Different Types of Exams

- **Multiple Choice.** Check the directions to see if the questions call for more than one answer. Answer each question in your head before you look at the possible answers. If you can come up with the answer before you look at the choices you eliminate the possibility of being confused by them. Mark questions you can't answer immediately and come back to them later. When taking a multiple-choice exam guess only if you are not penalized for incorrect answers. Use the following guidelines to make educated guesses.
  - If two answers are similar, except for one or two words, choose one of these answers.
  - If the answer calls for a sentence completion, eliminate the answers that would not form grammatically correct sentences.
  - If answers cover a wide range (5, 76, 87, 109, 500), choose a number in the middle.

  For machine-graded multiple-choice tests, be certain that the answer you mark corresponds to the question you are answering. Check the test booklet against the answer sheet whenever you start a new section and again at the top of each column.
- **True-False.** If any part of a true-false statement is false, the answer is false. Look for key words or qualifiers such as *all*, *most*, *sometimes*, *never*, or *rarely*. Questions containing absolute qualifiers such as *always or never* often are false.
- **Open Book.** When studying for this type of test, write down any formulas you will need on a separate sheet. Place tabs on important pages of the book so that you don't have to waste time looking for tables or other critical information. If you plan to use your notes, number them and make a table of contents. Prepare thoroughly for open-book tests. They are often the most difficult.

- **Short Answer/Fill-in-the-Blank.** These tests require students to provide definitions or short descriptions (typically a few words or a sentence or two). Study by using flashcards with important terms and phrases. Key words and facts will then be familiar and easy to remember as you answer test questions.
- **Essay.** When answering an essay question, first decide precisely what the question is asking. If a question asks you to compare, do not explain. Standard essay question words are listed next. Look up any unfamiliar words in a dictionary. Verbs commonly used in essay questions include: *analyze, compare, contrast, criticize, define, describe, discuss, enumerate, evaluate, examine, explain, illustrate, interpret, list, outline, prove, state, and summarize.*

  Before you write your essay, make a quick outline. There are three reasons for doing this. First, your thoughts will be more organized (making it easier for your teacher to read), and you will be less likely to leave out important facts. Second, you will be able to write faster. Third, if you do not have time to finish your answer, you may earn some points with the outline. Don't forget to leave plenty of space between answers. You can use the extra space to add information if there is time.

  When you write, get to the point. Start off by including part of the question in your answer. For example, if you are directed to discuss the benefits and drawbacks of universal health care coverage to both patients and medical professionals, your first sentence might read, "Universal health care will benefit patients in the following ways." Expand your answer with supporting ideas and facts. If you have time, review your answers for grammatical errors, clarity, and legibility.

Test preparation is essential if you plan to do well consistently on exams throughout your postsecondary education. The most important thing to remember about studying for tests, however, is that by studying you are ensuring better learning of the material covered.

Where Can I Get More Information?

The following organization offers additional information about studying for tests:

ERIC Clearinghouse on Assessment and Evaluation
The Catholic University of America
210 O'Boyle Hall
Washington, DC 20064–4035
Toll Free: 800–GO4–ERIC (464–3742)
E-mail: eric_ae@cua.edu
Web: http://www.cua.edu/www/eric_ae

Sources

References identified with ED or EJ are abstracted in the ERIC database. References with EJ are journal articles available at most research libraries. Those with ED are available in microfiche collections at more than 900 locations or can be obtained in paper copy from the ERIC Document Reproduction Service at 1–800–443–ERIC. Call 1–800–LET–ERIC for more details.

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